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The knowledge economy as alienation:

Outlines of a Digital Dark Age

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The separability of the products of human activity from their source is presupposed in the labour relation. The emergence of a global knowledge economy suggests that the most intimate aspects of human activity - thought and language – are now technologically and legally available for alienation on a global basis. But this has long been the case. People's words and thoughts have been alienable and commodifiable since the written word emerged as a major medium, a major organising technology. This begs the question: what is the meaning of a knowledge economy? What, indeed, is the nature of the commodity form in such an economy that warrants the economy being understood as qualitatively “new”?

The recent “privatisation” of national gene pools in Estonia and Tonga, for instance, provides us with a hint. The knowledge economy is not about “knowledge” at all. It is about extremely abstract property rights. It is about new legal institutions formalising title in previously unimaginable aspects of human existence on a previously unimagined scale. Thus “the transition to a knowledge economy” has little to do with capitalism and cannot be reduced to its logic. There are similar periods in history: during late twelfth century Europe when the feudal order was formalised at law; throughout the three centuries of the enclosures movement when land was “privatised” *en masse*. The global allocation of radio bandwidth throughout the early twentieth century was another such period.

In short, the trajectory we are currently seeing expressed is a wholesale legal redefinition of relationships between people, their thoughts, their biologies, and their geotechnical environments. The agents of formal alienation are the authors of law. The legal structures of the current age are immense, complex, and beyond the comprehension of most, if not all, individuals. “The law” thus appears as an immutable “thing”, as something that exists independently of what people do, like God. The “rule of law” is alienation *par excellence*. This is even more the case today. International law has developed technically and institutionally to a point comparable in relative scope and influence to the church in twelfth century Europe. International institutions have now reached the point at which they are able to *effectively* redefine what it means to be human in relation to other humans *at law*, and to do so for certain aspects of the whole of humanity.

Alienation, as it is generally understood, has never properly belonged to capitalism: “To be the man of another man” – *hommage* – was the essence of feudal relations. By the time it was fully defined, feudalism demanded the alienation of the whole person: the belonging of one’s self to another. *Feodalité* demanded dedication of the heart, mind, soul, and body – the whole of the human organism, self-pledged or consigned by birth to subservience. That governments are selling title in the genetic information of whole nations, thus rendering individuals’ genetic information the private property of someone else, merely extends the same logic that underpinned a fully codified *hommage*: a life for a life.

The current transition is merely a more intimate, abstract, and pervasive expression of the same oppressive logic. In this sense, the “knowledge economy”, and the qualitative forms of alienation peculiar to it, are little more than high-tech, highly-

centralised extensions of the various forms of legal relationships throughout history that have enabled certain people to direct the life energies of “others”. In return, the “others” receive their wholly mediated means of survival. In all of this, throughout history, the alienating phenomenon has not been the “things” of commerce, or the illusions of people, but the words — “the voice” -- of authority.

Since thought and language were torn asunder and apparently rendered independent of one another in the written word, ostensibly independent, “objective”, authoritative thought has spread across space and time, largely at the direction of those who control the most valued medium of the day. These media – these technologies - have been manipulated to produce, control, and reproduce particular assumptions about what it means to be a socially embedded human.

By physically separating thought from its thinker, something that the oral traditions could not do, writing formed the logical basis and organising principle for social control by authorial alienation. Writing is the historical source of the seamless trajectory that propagates “objective” authoritative thought across vast expanses of space and time. In short, because of millennia immersed in and regulated by sacred written texts, we have come to view language and thought as separate “things”. Language is encoded thought, no different from the technology of writing; thought processes are little more than biochemical computing systems. There is a barely implicit terrorism in such an illusion. The impetus for this illusory inversion - the metaphorical inversion of biology and technology – is that we have traditionally viewed technology as the highest expression of our humanity, especially since the allegedly “democratising” trajectory of literacy wrought by the printing press (which is once again in decline).

That same inverted illusion inspired F.W. Taylor, “father” of “scientific management”, to say: “In the past man has been first. In the future the System must be first”. Taylor’s words became policy. The Soviet Union was built according to the word. The New Deal. The Third Reich. The Viet Nam war was fought according to the principles of scientific (by then “strategic”) management. The “manager” of that war a former Ford CEO. He was a very efficient and productive man. The paradoxical fetishisms that cleave to such persons - those who have a recognisable and institutionally legitimised mastery of valorised dialects - along with the social sanction of the “sacred” institutions within which they exercise their discursive claim to sacred knowledge, is also a historically cumulative function of technologised dialects.

Historically, technical language tends towards “thingness”, towards linguistically objectifying the process under investigation. This has its advantages. In the first instance, the historical transition to the written medium transformed embodied discourses into static “things”. Writing turns words into “things”. The grammar of technological language also contributes greatly to the alien-ness of our most cherished knowledge-forms. Technically defined processes – “oxidation” for example – take on the appearance and grammatical status of a “thing”, an “entity”, and can then be hurled through the transit system of grammar and construed as Actors, Circumstances, or Rationales. They can be attributed with power beyond that of mere mortals: technologised words are words that have absorbed “intellectual” labour (to make a false distinction), and thus become “dead capital” with a specific, fixed value (and thus subject to the laws of depreciation).

Nominalised “knowledge” of our own social processes forms the basis of social policy, political discourse, and law. “Globalisation”, “competition”, and “deregulation” are excellent examples from the current pantheon: huge abstractions flattened out into one-dimensional shibboleths, stripped of all content other than their predetermined place in the evaluative constellations of competing ideologies. “Pure activity” has no place here.

Alienation is the religious impulse expressed with the naïve credulity of children as its presupposition. It is a game whose rules are given the objective character of the institutions that exercise their technocratic right to define human activity – human life – and its products as so much property. The objects of legalised alienability are now the most intimate aspects of humanity. What the practitioners of canon law achieved on a gross basis in the twelfth century, the practitioners of international law are achieving today: biotechnical homage – alienation fully expressed.

The formalisation of feudal relations in the twelfth century was just as much an end as it was a beginning. It was the expression of a complete breakdown in social relatedness, just as current progress in the techniques, technologies, and laws underpinning the current trajectory are. Today, we are faced with the complete saturation of commodity logic codified in positive law; the thorough infusion of exchange-value through every microscopic pore of humanity. The age of “universal prostitution” is upon us and it is transitional at most. “In the beginning was the word”. But the word was never ours. It was alienated from its source from the very beginning, precisely for the purpose of describing the Genesis of all humanity.